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ABSTRACT

Good storytellers possess polished presentation skills, own a fundamental tool for understanding the world, and are well prepared to learn to read and write, all of which are important in school. This study systematically documented and analyzed the implementation of a storytelling program in a preschool classroom at a cooperative day care center in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The program had three parts: children listening to adults tell stories, children performing stories in front of their peers, and children meeting with the teacher/researcher to plan out their story performances. The adult stories, children stories, and child-teacher conferences were taped and transcribed, and relevant observations about the children's behavior and parental comments were recorded. The data were coded to describe child-teacher interactions and to discover similarities among stories told during the program. (Results of that analysis were presented in a separate paper.) Interpretation of the program implementation from a teacher's perspective yielded four guiding principles for helping children tell better stories: (1) creating a "community of storytellers" is essential in implementing a storytelling curriculum; (2) adult models of storytelling can be a powerful instructional tool; (3) teachers should take an active role in helping children tell their stories; and (4) there are limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling. (Contains 9 references.) (EV)

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HELPING PRESCHOOLERS BECOME BETTER STORYTELLERS:

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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HELPING PRESCHOOLERS BECOME BETTER STORYTELLERS:

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

The current article stems from a teacher-research project aimed at answering the question: how can teachers help preschool children become better storytellers? Four principles for implementing storytelling curriculum are forwarded: 1. Creating a "community of storytellers" is essential in implementing a storytelling curriculum; 2. Adult models of storytelling can be a powerful instructional tool; 3. Teachers should take an active role in helping children tell their stories; and 4. There are limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling. These principles are elucidated through data and stories presented from a teacher's perspective. The article concludes with thoughts on the nature and place of teacher derived theory about classroom practice.

Key words: Classroom Practice; Storytelling; Teacher-Research

HELPING PRESCHOOLERS BECOME BETTER STORYTELLERS:

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE

The Importance of Children's Storytelling

In the preschool classroom where I teach there are many activities aimed at contributing to my charges' future academic success. I read the children books to promote their literacy skills, count with them to increase their understanding of numbers, and have numerous discussions about social interactions to help them learn about being part of a group. But perhaps the most important activity occurs when the children gather for storytime. While our storytime includes children listening to stories, it also involves an opportunity for children to come forward to tell their own tales to the group. It is the children's storytelling, as part of a curriculum aimed at helping preschoolers become better storytellers, that makes storytime so important.

The belief that storytime is my classroom's most valuable preschool activity stems from the importance of children becoming good storytellers. Good storytellers possess polished presentation skills, own a fundamental tool for understanding the world, and are well prepared to learn to read and write, all of which are important in school.

The simple act of children getting up in front of a group and talking has tremendous implications. Throughout their school careers children will be called upon to orally present their ideas. Learning how to present one's ideas in a compelling fashion involves gaining and coordinating a number of competencies: finesse with language, the ability to talk on one's feet, an understanding of timing, phrasing, and gesture, a sense of the dramatic, and the ability to judiciously use humor. At storytime children practice all these skills. Such

practice, in the intimate setting of preschool, is especially valuable for shyer children. Early experience with presenting may help these children overcome their natural reticence to speak in front of groups.

The contention that good storytellers own a fundamental tool for understanding the world comes from my reading of the works of the noted psychologist Jerome Bruner. Bruner (1990) argues that narrative, or storytelling, is one of the fundamental ways through which people make sense of the world. Through stories people explain and organize events, and make meaning about other peoples's actions as well as their own. Along with logical thinking, narrativity is an important cognitive ability to cultivate.

Good storytellers are well prepared to learn to read and write. When they reach school children will be taught to read by reading stories. Writing instruction will also be intricately connected to storytelling since children will often be asked to write stories. It is not surprising then that researchers have found that young children's narrative skills are far more reliable than general language abilities as an indicator of future school success (Snow, 1983). For scholars of literacy, the ability to tell a coherent story is seen as an essential literacy skill (Dickinson and McCabe, 1991).

Of course, there are more immediate reasons for including children's storytelling in a preschool curriculum. Like many other teachers, I was initially drawn to storytelling because of the compelling nature of the activity. Storytimes are engaging for all involved: for the storyteller, for the listeners, and for the teacher. To watch a four-year-old come forward to share a story is a wonderful sight. The child is full of pride and self-importance as he or she

takes the storyteller chair. The endeavor is big enough to be tremendously exciting, yet small enough not to overwhelm. The recognition that comes with being the storyteller has very positive implications for children's self-esteem. Yet storytime is not just for the teller. The listeners, who will soon have (or just have had) opportunities to tell, are also clearly involved. This role exchange, listeners becoming tellers and tellers becoming listeners, creates an exciting dynamic. Children begin recognizing features of their friends' stories, comment on these features, and borrow freely from each others' tales. Storytime becomes a large conversation with a compelling back and forth quality that a friend likens to "really good tennis. But better than tennis because there are more participants and everyone wins (Anne Kornblatt, personal communication). The excitement generated by storytime can knit a group together, creating the community feel that we all strive for in our classrooms. For teachers, storytime provides a window into our charges' inner world. Children's stories are rich with meaning, conveying feelings, interests, and understandings of the world. Thus for all involved, storytime is a pleasurable and exciting activity. On those occasions when a child tells a particularly good story, captivating the audience, the experience can have a magical quality.

For all these reasons, I have included children's storytelling in my classroom for the past ten years. During this decade I have read about other teachers' endeavors to help children tell stories (in particular the ground breaking work by Vivian Paley), experimented with my own program, and reflected on what seems to work and not work in a quest to improve my teaching methods. When it came time to write a dissertation as part of my

Ph.D. program at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study at Tufts University, I naturally gravitated to the topic of storytelling. In my dissertation I examined the question: how can teachers help preschool children become better storytellers?

The purpose of this article is to share what I learned from my investigation. Specifically, I outline four guiding principles for helping preschoolers become better storytellers. Culled from a teacher's perspective, or what I call teachers' theory, the four principles are:

1. Creating a "community of storytellers" is essential in implementing a storytelling curriculum;

2. Adult models of storytelling can be a powerful instructional tool;

3. Teachers should take an active role in helping children tell their stories; and

4. There are limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling.

The Study

Before I detail what I learned from my study, it is useful to understand how I discovered it (i.e., the project's methodology). In a nutshell, the study involved systematically documenting and then analyzing the implementation of a storytelling program in the preschool classroom where I taught.

The preschool classroom was part of a cooperative day care center located in Cambridge, Massachusetts. There were thirteen four-year-olds in my class. As a group, the class was culturally diverse. Four of the children spoke English as their second language. Two of these children were from Taiwan, one was from Japan, and one was from Germany.

Two of the other children were African-American. On the other hand, the group was economically homogenous. Eleven of the thirteen children came from well educated, upper-middle class families.

The storytelling program which the children participated in had three parts: children listening to adults tell stories, children performing stories in front of their peers, and children meeting with me to plan out their story performances. The program began with me telling stories at a daily storytime. My stories often included puppets, and were a mixture of international folk tales and stories of my own creation. Several months into the program I began giving the children an opportunity tell their own stories at storytime. Because of the overwhelming response to this voluntary activity, I set up a system where each child had a pre-set storytelling day. On their day, I met with each child to plan out their story performance. These conferences began with a discussion about the story's medium (i.e., potential use of puppets, pictures), characters, and setting. The child would then rehearse his or her story while I acted as an appreciative audience, asked clarifying questions, and made suggestions about the upcoming performance.

The children's stories, my stories, and child-teacher conferences were taped and then transcribed. I collected further data as the classroom teacher, gathering relevant observations about the children, and parental comments about children's reactions to the storytelling program.

I then employed some of the tools of the academic trade to analyze the data. I developed coding systems for describing child-teacher interactions, and for discovering

similarities between stories told during the program. These coding systems yielded a technical description of the storytelling program which is presented in my dissertation (Mardell, 1995).

Over the course of the project I also thought a great deal about what it all meant for my teaching, and for like-minded teachers who wished to help their children improve their storytelling abilities. The fruits of my contemplations are presented next.

Four Guiding Principles for Helping Children Tell Better Stories

As I thought about what information from my investigation would be useful for teachers, I considered providing a step by step description of the storytelling program I developed. The fact that I no longer use many aspects of the program in my teaching (due to the needs of the current group of children with whom I am working) made me realize that the situational nature of teaching counseled against presenting cookbook formulations. Instead, I have opted to present four guiding principles for helping children tell better stories.

These guiding principles are my "teachers' theory" about storytelling curriculum. I refer to the principles as theory because they are abstracted advice about how to set up and run a storytelling program. Embeded in the principles is a framework for thinking about, operating, and evaluating storytelling curricula. I refer to the principles as teachers' theory because they emerged from and are grounded in classroom experience. These principles are part of a theory of action that I, over the course of many years, have formulated about my pedagogical practices.

Better Storytellers...

1. Creating a "community of storytellers" is essential in implementing a storytelling curriculum.

Several years before I began the present research, I taught in the four-year-old room at the Eliot-Pearson Children's School. As in previous years, I implemented a storytelling curriculum inspired by the writings of Vivian Paley (1981). The curriculum involved opportunities for children to dictate stories which were then acted out by the entire group. But unlike previous years, the program just did not work. Storytimes were chaotic and unfocused, and the announcement of storytime was often met with cries of, "not this again." It was clear that the children were not invested in the activity. I was puzzled by this because it diverged so dramatically from my previous experiences with such curriculum, and it was not at all indicative of the children's approach to learning during the rest of the day. Eventually I gave in to popular sentiment and scrapped the activity, unable to figure out the problem. In retrospect, I ascribe the difficulty to my failure to create a community of storytellers.

By "community of storytellers" I am referring to an approach to storytelling among a group of children. The approach, or attitude, is that "stories are what we do"; that they are a group of learners who tell and listen to stories. There is, within the class, an excitement about--even a celebration of--storytelling. Creating a community of storytellers involves making a place in the classroom for telling, capturing children's attention regarding the curriculum, building excitement about the activity, and maintaining children's interest over time. The process consists of projecting a valuation about storytelling, establishing rituals

and routines which allow children to enter into and understand activities, and negotiating with children the nature of their participation in the curriculum.

Creating a community of storytellers (or of block builders or of painters) is what experienced teachers do almost instinctively, and the process is implicit in most discussions of curriculum. While the rationale and mechanics of creating communities of learners may be self-evident (or even unconscious) to experienced practitioners, the process may not be clear to novice educators. As a preservice teacher I know that I often wondered if there was not some magical element to teaching, and speculated that my mentor teacher must be some sort of wizard. How else could she coordinate the participation of a large group of young children in classroom's complex curricula? Making explicit the mechanics of creating communities of storytellers is helpful to beginning and veteran teachers alike; making the former aware of this important process, and helping the latter better explain their practice. Hence the following description of how a community of storytellers was created in the present case study is presented.

The storytelling program commenced with me telling stories to the group during a daily storytime. The storytimes were enormously popular. Certain stories quickly became classroom favorites, and several of my puppets achieved a reverence best described as rock star status. After several months of telling stories I felt that the children were ready to enter into the next stage of the program: children's storytelling. On the appointed day I approached four-year-old Beth and asked if she would like to tell a story at storytime. She was guardedly receptive to the idea, and with encouragement accepted the invitation. I chose

Beth to be the first child storyteller because of the importance of getting this component of the program off on the right foot. Beth was a skilled storyteller and a popular child, ensuring a good performance along with the children's attention. Beth requested two of my puppets, Pig Pig and Perfect, to use in her story. At storytime, I announced that there would be a "special storyteller" before I told my tale. Beth came forward and sat in the storyteller chair. My faith in Beth's abilities were confirmed as she told a very coherent story. After Beth was finished I asked if anyone else would like to be the special storyteller. Eight of the thirteen children's hands shot into the air.

Clearly, not all eight children could have told a story that day, or even the next day. What was required was a system for assigning children their storytelling days and helping them keep track of that information. Keeping track of the days of the week in itself is a difficult task for preschoolers. Keeping track of the day during the week when they would tell their stories is virtually an impossible task for preschoolers. The potential confusion over when they could tell stories posed a serious barrier to children's understanding and participation in the storytelling curriculum. Just as the inaccessibility of tools in an art area (e.g., scissors or markers stored above children's reach) can discourage participation in art activities, the inaccessibility of scheduling information could have discouraged participation in the storytelling program. My solution was to use the class calendar, placing children's names on their appointed days to tell stories. From the beginning of the year I had used a calendar to help children anticipate upcoming events and variations in classroom routines (e.g., field trips; three day weekends). On the calendar the days of the week were color-coded (e.g.,

Monday was red), and upcoming events were represented symbolically. The children were used to looking to the calendar for information. Employing the calendar for scheduling made the information accessible, providing a support which helped children understand their participation in the storytelling program (and making the very difficult task of waiting a little easier).

When I arrived at day care the next day, I was met by a gaggle of children, all wanting to discuss the storytelling program. Calib and Beth asked if it was their day to tell a story. Thomas asserted that it was his day to tell a story (it was not). I referred the children to the calendar where the schedule of storytellers was listed. After nap time, I attempted to conference with the children signed up as the day's storytellers. The first conference, with Samuel, hit a snag almost immediately. When I invited Samuel to practice his story, the negotiations began:

Ben: Do you want to practice your story now?

Samuel: I don't want to.

B: You don't want to practice?

S: No.

B: I thought that was why you were staying inside, to practice your story.

S: You know what?

B: What?

S: I have a secret story.

B: A secret story. So you're not going to tell me until story time?

S: Yeah.

B: Can you tell me, are you going to use just words for your story, or are you going to use any of the puppets?

S: I need puppets.

B: What puppets are you going to use?

S: I'm not telling.

B: What?

S: The puppets aren't going to talk.

B: The puppets aren't going to talk?

S: They are only going to open their mouths.

B: The problem with that kind of story is that kids won't really know what's going on unless they talk; unless you tell the kids what's going on.

S: OK.

B: So its actually a good idea to practice your story. I won't tell anyone what the secret is. But it helps make your story better if you practice it beforehand.

S: OK.

After Samuel agreed to rehearse his story, he again had second thoughts. Another round of negotiations ensued, eventually resulting in Samuel rehearsing part of his story. The next conference, with Jai-Qui, proceeded relatively smoothly. However, the final conference, with Meiko, was derailed by numerous interruptions. First, Thomas broke in, wondering if it was his day to tell a story. He was told it was not. Soon afterward Thomas interrupted again, this time wondering when it would be his day to tell a story. Not long after Thomas' second interruption Beth came in from outside in tears. She had hurt herself, and required

my immediate attention. At that point Meiko's conference was terminated.

That evening I wrote in my daily field notes, "I wonder if this program will ever get off the ground." I guess I was a bit taken aback by the constancy and intensity of the negotiations regarding the children's storytelling component of the program. I should not have been surprised. With a curriculum undertaking as complicated as the storytelling program, the second day of the children's storytelling went exactly as should have been expected. Systems had to be worked out, and the children made familiar with the routines in order for the program to get off the ground. In the back of my mind I knew this was the case, and pushed ahead.

In the back of my mind, I also knew that getting the program off the ground would take some time. Every day during the that first month at least one child would ask if it was his or her day to tell a story. These children were patiently referred to the calendar. Almost half the child-teacher conferences included some discussion about the nature of the storytelling program. The discussions generally involved children questioning the need for such conferences. Storytimes themselves could also be acrimonious, with children both lobbying to tell stories before their appointed day, or suddenly getting cold feet, and backing out of story performances.

That children backed out at their story performances speaks to the ambivalent feelings many children had about talking in front of the group during the initial few weeks of their storytelling. Children were excited about the possibility of telling, but the reality of performing was a different matter. While in the first month of the program, all but two

children tried telling stories, I had to do a fair amount of cajolling to reach this level of participation. About half the children enthusiastic took their turns telling stories. About a quarter of the group regularly passed up opportunities to participate.

To gain acceptance of the terms of the curriculum, and reach full participation in the program, I needed to negotiate with individual children. For example, Allister continually passed on chances to tell stories. I was surprised by this because when Allister had told a story at the onset of the program he seemed very excited about the opportunity. Moreover, Allister was a friendly, extroverted child, who was eager to please his teachers. Because we had a good relationship, I approached Allister directly and asked why he was reluctant to tell stories. Allister's response was that he had "already told a story." Apparently, Allister felt that having told his dinosaur tale there was nothing left for him to tell. I explained that I had enjoyed his first story, and that he could (with assistance if he so desired) tell another story. This conversation was enough to convince Allister to tell more stories, and afterwards Allister never missed an opportunity to participate in the program.

Gaining William's participation was a bit more involved. During his initial story performances, William spent a great deal of time negotiating where he was going to sit while telling his story (e.g., with the audience, on the floor, outside). When his demands could not be met, William declined to tell a story. After several weeks of these antics, I devised a system in which I wrote down the stories William told during his child-teacher conferences. Then, during his story performances, I read the narratives as William acted them out with puppets. The system provided an avenue to circumvent William's performance anxieties,

allowing him to fully participate in the curriculum.

While negotiations were taking place on an individual level, part of gaining acceptance of the program also took place at the group level. Building a community of storytellers entails gaining a group's participation and enthusiasm for the activities, along with their adherence to certain routines. Gaining the children's collective participation in the storytelling program involved navigating the complex web of relationships that made up the group's dynamics. A powerful force at work here was the children's desire for camaraderie. Ironically, at times the children's friendship bonds hindered the flow of the program. Leah and Katyana were two children who were initially reluctant to tell stories. They quickly found comfort as comrades who did not tell stories, and excitement between them was born from the perception of defying authority. I was careful not to fan the flames here, and never pressed for their participation. Eventually, it was the desire to join the other children in the fun that won Leah and Katyana over to the program. Indeed, the friendships between the children also fostered attempts to create a community of storytellers. The enthusiasm that began to grow about storytelling was certainly linked to the group nature of the program. Allister's comment to Thomas, Calib and Beth that "I'm going to tell a dinosaur story today, and you guys will love it" is emblematic of the excitement that the peer group helped create about storytelling. As the children learned the routines of the program, I was able to pull back from my leadership and initiator role. The group began running the program.

After about month of children telling stories, an understanding about this aspect of the curriculum had been worked out. Children stopped asking me if it was their day to tell a

story, referring instead to the sign up calendar and to each other. The fact that child-teacher conferences were a prerequisite to performing was accepted without discussion. Storytimes ran smoothly. Despite the fact that I no longer solicited children to tell stories, a nearly full participation rate (95%) was achieved.

Along with the qualitative increase in participation came a qualitative change in the nature of this participation; children had become passionate about storytelling. The first indication of the depth of the children's enthusiasm for storytelling came in the form of a phone call I received from Calib's mother Liz about six weeks after children began telling stories. Liz called one morning because her son was in tears. It seemed that Calib was going to be absent from day care that day, spending time with father. While normally relishing such visits, Calib was despondent because he was scheduled to tell a story. Liz asked if Calib could come to day care to tell his story. Naturally, I agreed.

Calib was not alone in his passion for storytelling. I continued to be greeted by children at day care, now excitedly announcing what would be involved in the stories they would tell later that day. Children carefully monitored the sign up calendar, expressing growing anticipation as the days of the week progressed towards their storytelling day. The children also kept track of when friends would tell stories, and would often congregate around the calendar, discussing the week's schedule of storytellers. Many times the children greeted their parents with reports about their story performance. By the end of the second month, full participation in the program was achieved.

A sunny day in June was the last day of the storytelling program. As they had for

some time, the events of the day proceeded smoothly. It was fitting that five months after she told the children's first story, Beth's name appeared on the calendar to tell the last tale. According to her mother, Beth had been talking about her upcoming performance for several days, and had practiced the story over breakfast that morning. On my arrival at day care, Thomas causally mentioned to me that it was Beth's day to tell a story. The child-teacher conference proceeded smoothly. Beth responded excitedly when I asked her if she would like to talk about her performance, and we were only interrupted once during our fifteen minute chat. Storytime also went off well. Beth told a wonderful story; a complex and coherent ten minute tale that received an enthusiastic reception from the audience. All of this was a far cry from how the program operated five months before.

2. Adult models of storytelling can be a powerful instructional tool.

Anyone who has spent time in an early childhood classroom is probably familiar with the phenomenon of children playing teacher. The phenomenon often occurs during choice time and immediately after a teacher-led large group meeting. Rather than choosing to build with blocks or paint or dress up as fire fighters, a number of children will stay behind in the meeting area. One of these children will sit in the teacher's chair and lead a "meeting": "reading" books to the group; calling on the other children with questions; and disciplining unruly peers. Children can be quite skilled as they lead these group sessions, and it is clear that much has been learned from careful observation of teachers at work. The playing teacher phenomenon is suggestive of the pedagogical potential of children's observations of adults engaged in meaningful activities. Harnessing this potential is what is involved when adult

models are used as an instructional tool in helping children tell better stories.

The children who play teacher are clearly motivated to engage in the activity by their observations of adults. This motivation can be useful in overcoming the inertia which is often encountered when presenting new activities to groups of children. As those familiar with preschoolers know, a certain amount of resistance is standard for virtually any new classroom endeavor. In particular, activities that require children to perform in front of an audience seldom achieve complete participation. Thus the general enthusiasm for the storytelling program, and the program's impressively high participation rates (100% by the end of the program), are unusual. I attribute part of the popularity of storytelling to the fact that, as part of our community of storytellers, I was telling stories too. Certainly the initial desire of many children to tell stories, to come before the group, sit in the teacher chair, and use puppets, was motivated by their observations of my storytelling.

Children who play teacher have also constructed an understanding of the activity based on their observations of adults. Such was certainly the case in the storyteller program. From the onset of the children's storytelling, the influence of children's observations of my stories on their narratives was apparent. When Beth told the first children's story her main characters were Pig Pig and Perfect, two pig puppets who appeared frequently in my stories. Many of my pig tales began with the ritualized opening:

Pig Pig and Perfect were in bed. And they woke up. They got dressed and they went down stairs to have breakfast. They had oatmeal for breakfast. They always have oatmeal. Then they went outside...

The start of Beth's story seems to parody this opening, as she started her tale:

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Pig Pig and Perfect had nothing to do. They were just in bed. So they fell asleep all the time. But they couldn't wake up. Because they threw everything in the house. They threw everything away. And they had nothing.

And they woke up to have breakfast. But they said, "we have nothing to eat for breakfast." So they slept some more. Then they waited for some more breakfast. But nothing came out. So they slept some more. And still no breakfast.

The parody continued in the next section, where Beth drew upon "The Popcorn Story", the children's favorite story from my collection. In "The Popcorn Story", Pig Pig and Perfect:

...all alone in the apartment where they lived. "I am so hungry" said Pig Pig. "So am I" said Perfect. Then Pig Pig had an idea. "Let's make popcorn!" "Good idea" said Perfect.

In Beth's performance, the Pig Pig and Perfect:

...were just walking around looking for their breakfast. "Oh, there is no breakfast and we're hungry!" "Me too" "What can we eat?" "I know, we can eat all the furniture."

Not surprisingly, at the end of both stories, Pig Pig and Perfect had stomach aches; a result of over eating. Beth's use of observations to construct her story was not an isolated event. As the program proceeded, I was continually struck by how much the children borrowed from my stories.

When it came time to analyze the data about the curriculum, I looked closely at the phenomenon of borrowing, and confirmed that the children had indeed taken a great deal from what they heard in my stories (and to a lesser extent in peers' stories) to construct their own tales. Elements of stories borrowed included characters, and ways of structuring narratives.

Nearly two-thirds of the characters used in the children's stories had their origin in my stories. Most popular were my puppets, who almost always retained their identities when the

children used them in their stories. For example, the pig puppets were always Pig Pig and Perfect, affable siblings with a penchant for food. The monster face puppet was always Bubla, a gruff character with a heart of gold, and the frog puppet was always Joe Pizza, a fast talking private detective out to solve mysteries. The children also borrowed characters from my oral tales (e.g., the dim-witted farmer Uncle Booky and his mischievous nephew Maurice). The children's stories were also populated with generic characters (e.g., a fox) along with characters who originated in stories told by parents. Significantly, only 3% of the characters which appeared in the children's stories had commercial origins (e.g., Power Rangers). This low frequency should give hope to teachers trying to provide children alternatives to the violent cartoon characters often used in storytelling and imaginary play.

In more than half the children's stories there was also some borrowing in the structuring of the narrative. Perhaps the most spectacular example of such borrowing comes from Beth's final story. Before she was scheduled to tell her story Beth heard the following passage in a Haitian folktale that I retold the class:

[Uncle Booky] saw an old man eating a sandwich. He took a bite of the sandwich and Uncle Booky could tell that it tasted really good. Uncle Booky went up to the man and said "excuse me sir, what kind of sandwich are you eating?" The old man didn't say anything because he was deaf and couldn't hear Uncle Booky's question. Uncle Booky repeated his question a little louder. "Excuse me, can you tell me what kind of sandwich you're eating?" The man didn't hear and kept on eating his sandwich and Uncle Booky could tell that it was a very tasty sandwich. Uncle Booky said "excuse me sir, but could you please tell me what kind of sandwich you are eating?"

Two days latter, Beth included the following passage in her story:

Just then Pig Pig noticed something. It was a man walking down the street with something. So he stepped out. He said "what are you carrying sir?!" The man didn't tell him because he could not hear Pig Pig because he was too busy concentrating on walking. So he said

again, "Could you please. What are you carrying? What are you carrying?" he called. But he [the man] still didn't answer. So he [Pig Pig] said "could you please tell me what you are carrying." But the man didn't tell him because he had to concentrate on doing.

Beth clearly drew on my story to structure her narrative. While the characters and theme are different, the underlying organization is the same. Both passages begin with a character asking a question of a second character. The second character does not respond, indeed is unable to respond, because he could not hear the question. The first character then restates the question to which there is no response. The first character then repeats the question again. Data such as this provides powerful evidence that the children were learning a great deal about stories from their observations.

While children are observing and learning from us all the time, adult models are generally not consciously used as an instructional tool in early childhood classrooms. Perhaps this is due to a fear that models of, for example, adults painting or writing might overwhelm children who would feel compelled to rigidly follow the mature examples, stifling creativity. While certainly possible, this fear was not borne out in my experiences with the storyteller program. No child ever exactly copied one of my stories. Their borrowing always involved some reformulation. Rather than a rigid model to follow, the adult stories made available a resource that children were free to borrow from or to ignore. In their quest to become mature storytellers, the children were trying on different voices, experimenting with form (story structure) and content (characters). They were, in the view of one theorist, learning to "make words their own" (Wertsch, 1991). In this regard, adult models of storytelling were a powerful instructional tool.

Better Storytellers...

3. Teachers should take an active role in helping children tell their stories.

While in graduate school I had the good fortune to attend a course taught by Eleanor Duckworth. Watching Dr. Duckworth teach was a fascinating and inspiring experience, and I spent much of the class time observing and contemplating her teaching methods. The level of concentration Dr. Duckworth brought to the classroom was reminiscent of someone playing chess, skillfully playing out strategies embodied in a various moves (of course, this chess match was played with many people in hopes of everyone winning). All teachers make "moves" as they teach, but unfortunately they are generally far more limited. We are all familiar with the most common move of traditional teachers, what Courtney Cazden (1988) has labeled Question-Response-Evaluation. Here, the teacher asks a question (what is two plus two), the student gives a response, (four), and the teacher evaluates the response (correct). In developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms this strategy has been largely replaced by what can be call the "that's great" move. Here, the teacher acknowledges and accepts children's comments and/or products with general or specific praise. One of the aspects of Dr. Duckworth's teaching that impressed me was even though she embodies the values that I, as a member of the developmental camp, hold, her teaching involved so much more than the "that's great" move. In fact, she had a dazzling array of strategies which she played out skillfully in the classroom, creating a rich learning environment.

I recount my impressions of Dr. Duckworth's teaching because the idea of strategies and moves helps frame one of the central questions of my research: what is the role of teachers in helping children tell better stories. Here I am focusing specifically on the online

interactions that occur as a child tells a story. By thinking about these interactions as a series of moves, and then cataloging possible strategies, discussing when to make certain moves, and then presenting criteria for judging interactions' effectiveness, the role teachers have in helping children tell better stories becomes clearer.

Before cataloging, strategizing, and evaluating potential moves, it is useful to become familiar with these child-teacher interactions. To illuminate this, a transcript of a child-teacher conference held with Allister is presented. The conference, which occurred near the end of the storyteller program, lasted over ten minutes (an amount of one-on-one time which is significant in itself). The conference began with me trying to discover what Allister was doing with some chairs he was using as props:

Ben: You are setting up for your story? Let me ask you a couple of questions about it, okay. Where's this house [symbolized by the chairs] going to be?

Allister: This one and this.

B: Okay, so there are going to be two houses. Where are these two houses? Are they near the day care center?

A: No, this is a barn.

B: Oh, this is a barn. Is it a farm?

A: Yeah.

B: Oh, it's a farm. So are the animals sleeping in a house or a barn?

A: A barn.

B: In the barn. Okay.

A: I need some animals.

B: Okay, you need to get some animals.

At this point Allister went off to the block area, and returned a minute later with an armful of plastic farm animals. He then asked me about the quantity of animals, as it had become important to the children to populate their stories with many characters:

A: Is that many?

B: Yes, you do have many. Many farm animals. Now does this farm have a farmer?

A: Umm. Umm.

B: Or just farm animals?

A: A farmer.

B: Who is the farmer?

A: Machico [referring to one of my puppets].

B: Oh, Machico is the farmer. Okay. And in your story, are silly things going to happen? Are scary things going to happen?

A: Ummm. Silly.

B: So this is going to be a silly farm story?

A: Yeah!

B: Great. I'll listen for silly things and if I have any ideas for other silly things that might happen I'll mention them to you.

After a bit more set up, Allister began rehearsing his story:

A: Machico was walking and he went down.

B: Ah ha.

A: Went to the barn and he said "wake up animals. Wake up." Isn't that funny?

B: Yeah, I don't think the farmers usually say "wake up animals."

A: Yeah [laughs].

B: What did the animals do?

A: They didn't say anything and they go to eat.

B: Okay.

A: Isn't that funny also?

B: Yeah, a little funny. It would be funny if they said something to the farmer too.

A: Yeah, animals can't talk.

B: That's right. So that would be funny.

A: Yeah. And the sheep say "go away farmer." [Allister laughs]

B: That's funny.

A: And. And the pigs said. The pigs said "na na nee boo boo. You can't catch me. We are in the barn."

B: That's very silly.

A: Pig Pig goes up. Hop, hop, hop. Boink. Boink. Opps. Pig Pig fall down. Pig Pig and he climbed a tree. That's funny. Pigs can't climb trees.

Allister then paused, and began to act out a scene with the plastic animals. He was largely non-verbal, speaking only in response to my requests for explanations about the proceedings. To this point, Allister's story was similar to the tales he had told for the past two months: a series of events would happen (e.g., the animals would make silly statements; Pig Pig would climb a tree), but there was no problems which were resolved. Sensing that he might be ready to tackle a more complicated plot structure, I asked:

B: Allister, I have a question: is there going to be any scary parts of this story?

A: No.

B: Any problems that the farmer has to solve?

A: Yes.

B: What's the problem. Is it a problem with the barn? With a storm or something?

A: The barn.

B: What's going to happen with the barn?

A: Its going to fall down.

B: Oh no. Okay, I'd like to hear that part.

A: Why?

B: Cause I think it sounds interesting. I'm wondering what the farmer is going to do when the barn falls down and how you are going to tell about it. I think the kids will be interested in this.

A: I don't know.

Allister paused, considered the situation, and began again:

A: And the barn fall down [Allister pushes over the chair representing the barn].

B: Crash!

A: Crash it goes.

A: And the barn fall down and the parrot and Machico and all the farm animals went running, running, running, running to see what is going on. And it has (unintelligible).

B: It has what?

A: Fire in it.

B: It had fire in it. Oh no.

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A: And Machico quickly, quickly find a phone and called. Called the fireman. And the fireman drive to the barn. And he said "look. Our barn is on fire." And all the animals came. And they threw there to the barn. And they all looked.

B: How did they feel? Where they sad or scared?

A: They are sad.

B: Cause their house is burning down. Yeah.

A: And the fireman quickly put the water on it and, and it looked better, but they don't know how put it up again.

B: To put the barn back up?

A: Yeah.

B: Maybe, Machico is a farmer. Do you think she knows how?

A: Yep. But it is too big for her. Its too big for her so she has to climb a mountain.

B: Ah ha.

A: That what she do.

B: Why does she have to climb a mountain?

Allister acts out Machico climbing the mountain by raising the

puppet over his head.

B: Oh, so she'll be taller.

A: Yeah.

B: Oh, okay, and the mountain is your head. I get that. And then what does she do when she is at the top?

A: Jump on the barn and BACK ON!

B: Ah.

A: And the barn is on.

B: Great, that was great.

Allister then told a concluding verse where the baby pigs nursed from their mother (his mother had recently given birth to a baby boy), and then all the animals went to sleep. He finished by stating:

A: I'm done.

B: That's a fun story. I liked the beginning. It was very funny.

A: Why?

B: Because there were all those silly things. And I really enjoyed listening to the problem about the barn falling down and being on fire and how Machico solved it.

A: Yeah. Maybe when I tell that part in my story they will be scared.

B: Yeah. They might be scared. Yeah.

Thomas [who was listening in]: I won't be scared because I know it.

B: Yeah, so don't tell the surprise.

A: Don't tell the surprise.

There was a lot going on in the conference with Allister. I initiated discussions about props, performance techniques, and the structure of the narrative. Our discussions about narrative structure touched upon general plot considerations to clarifications about the details of immediate actions to the intricacies of humor. All this would seem to make classifying teacher strategies in these conferences difficult. Yet beyond the variety in the content of interactions, similarities in how conversations were initiated and maintained appear. These similarities allow for a cataloging of teacher moves and strategies. Described next are five

types of moves which teachers can keep in mind as they help children formulate their stories. They are:

- listening for meaning;
- asking clarifying questions;
- asking leading questions and making suggestions;
- asking the teller to take the audience's perspective; and
- limiting options.

Embedded throughout the conference with Allister was the **listening for meaning** move. While difficult to see in the transcript, listening for meaning was what I was doing most of the time. Listening for meaning is fundamental when helping children tell stories. A prerequisite to all other interactions, listening provides an understanding of what children are trying to say, and an awareness of their storytelling abilities. Listening is the only way to gather this information. The listening move is not passive, and can include nodding, smiling, acknowledging, and praising to encourage tellers to continue talking. Listening also involves a great deal of work, trying to figure out what children's stories mean. While the listening move is fundamental, the role of teachers in no way stops here.

Towards the end of Allister's story, he was in part describing and in part acting out Farmer Machico's repair of the fire ravaged barn. Because it was unclear what Allister intended for Machico, I asked him "why does she have to climb a mountain?" A moment latter I queried "what does she do when she's at the top [of the mountain]?" Making these **clarifying question** moves was important because storytelling is about communication. For

Allister to communicate better, he had to explain what was happening with Machico and the barn. Ambiguity was not an issue unique to Allister. Preschoolers are notorious for making statements such as "she ran away" without specifying the she. Asking who she is brings to the teller's attention the need to make such matters clear. In the long run, young children may internalize these questions, learning to independently tell clearer stories (the issue of children internalizing adult questions is addressed in greater detail below).

When midway through Allister's story I asked "is there going to be any scary parts of this story?" I was making an **asking leading question** move. I had made a leading question move earlier in the conference when I asked Allister "what did the animals do?" after Farmer Machico told them to wake up. These questions were not asked randomly, but rather pointed out to Allister expectations about, and possibilities for, his story. The "scary part" question highlighted a dramatic direction that the story could take. The "what did the animals do" question pointed out the expectation that the ensuing events in the story would be connected to the preceding events. In general, leading questions revolve around the basic issues of preschoolers' narrative development. Three, four, and five-year-olds are working on ordering the events in their stories, informing listeners how they feel about these events (evaluation), supplying some orientative and descriptive details (e.g., where the story is taking place), and beginning to form the semblance of plots that involve problems/issues which are resolved in some dramatic highpoint. Leading questions focus children's attention on these important aspects of storytelling. Asking "what happened next" highlights sequencing, asking "how did you feel about that" highlights evaluation, asking "where was

this" highlights orientation, and asking "was there a problem in the story" points to plot possibilities.

Making suggestions is the direct form of leading questions. In our discussion of humor at the beginning of Allister's story, my statement "It would be funny if they [the animals] said something to the farmer" is a good example of the making suggestions move. Suggestions again point out to children the possibilities of storytelling. Since the directness of suggestions can imply less choice than leading questions, I generally reserve suggestions to instances where there is a collaborative discussion taking place. Such collaboration was taking place when Allister and I were discussing what would make his story funny.

The leading questions and suggestions moves leave children free to take up the possibilities for stories implied. The moves are analogous to what art educator Sylvia Feinburg (class notes) calls "lightly dropped suggestions." An example of a lightly dropped suggestion in painting instruction occurs when watching a child paint a face at the easel. On seeing the child glob a circle of paint to represent an eye, the excess dripping down to leave a streak across the check and mouth, the teacher could suggest how to wipe off a brush on a paint can to avoid such drips. The child could utilize this information or not. With leading questions and suggestions, if the child is ready and so inclined, he or she can use the move to further their story. If not, the move can be ignored.

In the conference with Allister I suggested that a problem with the barn could occur. Allister agreed, telling me that the barn is going to fall down. He then wondered why he should tell about this. I explained "Cause I think it sounds interesting. I'm wondering what

the farmer is going to do when the barn falls down, and how you are going to tell about it. I think the kids will be interested in this." In making reference to the children I asked Allister to take the perspective of the audience. The **asking the teller to take the perspective of the audience** move provides a rationale for the clarifying question and making suggestions moves, and is attached onto one of these moves. For example, in a clarifying question move the teacher could begin "I don't think the children will be able to follow this unless you explain...). Asking the teller to take the audience's perspective broadens children's views of themselves as storytellers, making explicit some of their responsibilities towards their listeners.

While no examples of the **limiting options** move appear in the conference with Allister, this does not imply the move is uncommon. The move, in which the teacher restricts the storytellers range of alternatives, occurs regularly in two situations. The first situation involves helping children end their stories. Preschoolers are learning about framing narratives; how to begin and end their stories. This can become a problem when storytellers ramble on, outlasting their audiences' attention spans. The limiting options move is often made to gently bring an end to stories. The second situation regards story content. With few exceptions, I take a civil libertarian position toward subject matter, rarely censoring storytellers. The exceptions include "bathroom talk" and throwing puppets. Children can become stuck in these crowd pleasing tactics, detracting from their narratives. Through experience I have learned it takes children far longer to tire of such antics than I have the patience to endure.

Given this array of possible strategies, the obvious question for teachers becomes: what move to make? Answering this question reveals that teaching is much more an art than an exact science. There are no clear prescriptions about the content or form moves to make. The answer is completely situational; a function of the particular child, the particular conference, and the teacher's goals for the child in the conference. There are, however, three guidelines I use for thinking about the question of what moves to make. First, the choice of moves depends on the child's responsiveness to guidance. Some children are very open to input about their stories. They freely use advice to help build better narratives. For these children leading questions and suggestions are in order. Other children are very resistant to input, their agendas for storytelling clashing with teacher efforts to influence their performances. For these children listening and occasional clarifying questions are most appropriate. Second, the choice of moves depends on the child's storytelling abilities. Occasionally, a child will seem on the cusp of a new skill (e.g., Allister being able to tell a story with a sense of a plot). Leading questions are appropriate for these children. Other children, particularly those with limited English capabilities, may need a great deal of support in constructing their stories. If amendable to guidance, these children can benefit from many leading and clarifying questions. Third, I recommend varying the moves made in a conference. Harping on one component of storytelling is tedious. Restricting moves to just one form makes conferences too predictable. Variety helps keep conferences lively and vibrant.

In the midst of employing these strategies, it is natural for teachers to wonder: is this

at all effective? Again, we are in a murky area of education. An eternal frustration of teachers is that we can never definitely know the impact of our work. Did a strategy that seemed to help a child hit upon a competency that was going to emerge anyway? Did seemingly unsuccessful strategies actually set in motion a process that had a noticeable impact only years later? Because these questions have no clear answers, we are forced to muddle through with impressions and faith.

In the short run, impressions about strategies effectiveness come from circumstantial evidence. Such evidence in Allister's conference was the discussion about making the farmer/ animal dialogue funnier. Here it seems Allister used one of my moves to improve his story.

Whether such a short term improvement in stories translates into children becoming better storytellers is difficult to substantiate. In theory, children come to internalize the questions, suggestions, and limitations of options we provide them. They construct new stories in response to questions asked during previous stories. They tell who is in their stories, what happens in their stories, and how they felt about it all in answer to implicit questions constructed from the questions of previous audiences. In practice, whether Allister is a better storyteller today because of his participation in my program is a matter of faith.

Faith that teachers' assistance can help preschoolers improve their storytelling abilities is encouraged by my research. Over the five months of children's telling stories, there was a four-fold increase in the average length of stories told. With these longer stories came more sophisticated plots, characterizations, and performance techniques. It seemed that

the moves I was making were helping children become better storytellers.

The view that teachers have an active--on line--role in children's explorations of the world is not universally embraced in early childhood education. Several years ago I visited a day care center in the Boston area, and was given a tour by the director. The director was justifiably proud of her center, and was particularly pleased with the quality of the staff. She remarked about their dedication, their care for the children, and about the engaging materials they presented the children to explore. "There's just one thing", the director added hesitantly, "the staff puts out great stuff for the children to interact with, but then they just observe. I wish they would interact more with the kids." "You mean you want them to teach more" I responded. "Oh no!" the director said, recoiling from the word teach, "Just interact more."

My conversation with the director points to the ambivalence many have about adult involvement in children's learning. In part, this is a legacy of a romantic interpretation of Piagetian theory, highlighting children's construction of knowledge as a maturational process without reference to adult guidance. In part, this is also a reaction to teachers' own negative experiences with heavy-handed and stifling teaching practices. The result is that many of us are hesitant to become involved with children as they explore their world, contenting ourselves with presenting compelling material and observing the results. I challenge this thinking across the curriculum. Teaching should involve more than making materials available or providing opportunities to engage in activities such as storytelling. Adult guidance can support and stretch learning, making aspects of materials, competencies, and

knowledge more accessible to children. Such was the case when I raised the idea with Allister of having a problem in his story. Our discussion made him more aware of this plot possibility, helping him tell a better story.

4. There are limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling.

It may seem contradictory that after spending quite a few pages outlining the pro-active role teachers have in helping children tell stories, I am now arguing that there are definite and important limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling. Rather than being contradictory, I am struggling with the age old educational question: how much to teach and how much to allow children to explore on their own? The question of how far teachers should go with instruction and guidance is an issue faced across grade levels and content areas. The question becomes particularly pointed when concerns about creativity are involved. Should we explicitly teach four-year-olds brush stroke technique, or let them experiment unimpeded with paints is one manifestation of this question.

The prevailing answer to the question of how much to teach goes back and forth over the years from more to less directedness. These swings are as much influenced by larger societal forces as by educational theorists. Currently, the pendulum is swinging towards more intervention and directed teaching. Perhaps this is a reaction to the romanticism of the Nineteen Sixties and Seventies. Perhaps it involves a rush to answer newspaper headlines which proclaim how much American children do not know, be that how to read, simple math facts, or the capital of France. Whatever the reason, the popular sentiment that children need to be taught more dovetails nicely with the theoretical framework currently in ascendancy in

educational psychology, the socio-cultural perspective.

Often associated with the name Vygotsky, the sociocultural perspective describes how learning takes place in, is in fact inextricably connected to, social contexts (for a good overview of the perspective, see Rogoff [1990]). Highlighting the role interactions between teachers and children have in learning, sociocultural theorists often use the metaphor of scaffolding to explain instructional situations. Scaffolding describes the support adults can provide students in helping them build their competencies to higher and higher levels.

There is much that is useful for teachers in the sociocultural perspective. For example, reading Rogoff's writings alerted me to the role that observations can have in instruction. But like all theories, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes certain aspects of the human experience at the expense of others. The problem with educators unquestioningly embracing the sociocultural perspective as a guide for instruction (with its implicit push towards more directed teaching) is not in what the perspective says, but in what it is missing. In particular, the perspective has little to say about the individual as an individual. There is little recognition of the differences among learners concerning readiness for instruction. Nor are the emotional lives of individuals recognized. When proponents of the perspective speak of scaffolding children's development, there is little or no sense of a ceiling to how high the scaffolding could or should go.

If there were no costs in unlimited scaffolding, then the issue of limits on how much to teach would not be of great concern. Unfortunately, there are potentially devastating consequences to going to far. Learning is a highly personal experience, and how instruction

proceeds effects not only skill and knowledge acquisition, but how students feels about themselves particularly as learners. A learner's self-concept, in turn, is likely to influence future scholarship. If we push to far, we risk damaging young children's sense of themselves.

My experiences working with Calib in the storytelling program illustrate the risks of trying to teach children too much. Calib, a second generation Nigerian-American from a working class family, entered day care at fourteen months. A talented artist, and a sought after friend, Calib was generally reserved with adults. As witnessed from his mother's phone call mentioned earlier, Calib was an enthusiastic participant in the storytelling program.

Calib's early story performances were similar to some of his peers. These performances, which looked more like dramatic play than storytelling, involved Calib bumping puppets into each other and making sound effects. Narratively speaking, these stories were almost pure action, with little orientation information, description of events, or sense of plot. Calib would minimally describe one puppet encounter after another, continuing until I called a halt to the proceedings. I had little appreciation for this type of story. Besides finding them exceedingly dull, they did not seem to be leading the tellers to an understanding of what constituted a compelling narrative.

After learning about the children's storytelling styles, I decided to push the children who were telling these dramatic play stories towards providing more in their narratives. I felt a particular urgency with Calib who, because of his race and class membership, was statistically more likely to encounter difficulties in school. At the same time, I was hesitant

to interfere with Calib's storytelling. Having read Sarah Michaels' (1981) research describing how teachers can hinder children's storytelling abilities by confusing differences in culturally based narrative styles with lags in storytelling abilities, I was wary of inadvertently derailing Calib's narrative development.

In the end, I adopted a two pronged strategy for working with Calib. First, I gave Calib extensive latitude to act out his stories. During his story performances in particular, I allowed him large blocks of uninterrupted time to do as he pleased. Concurrently, during the child-teacher conferences I provided Calib some very directed teaching. I asked a steady stream of clarifying questions requesting that Calib articulate what was going on in his action adventures. I also peppered his rehearsals with leading questions, asking him to provide some orientative and evaluative information about his stories. A particularly successful example of these interactions (successful in that Calib answered my questions) occurred during the second month of the children's storytelling. As Calib worked with the frog puppet Joe Pizza, I asked:

Ben: What did he just do?

Calib: Hop.

B: Ah ha.

C: He went like this now.

B: Are they going anywhere special?

C: Yeah.

B: Where?

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C: They are going to the park.

B: Great. What are they going to do there?

C: Go down the slide.

B: Get on the swing?

C: Go down the slide.

B: On the slide, okay.

C: Shoooooo.

B: They went down the slide. Did they have a good time on the slide?

C: Yeah.

B: Oh, good.

As the storytelling program proceeded, Calib continued to relish the opportunity to be the storyteller, eagerly awaiting his turn. He seemed happy just to be sitting in front of his friends in the storyteller chair. Attempts at instruction, however, lagged as Calib seemed to tire of my constant questioning. The following exchange was typical of Calib's growing resistance, manifested in "I don't knows" and minimal answers, to explain his story. As Calib played with the pig puppet Perfect, I asked:

Ben: What's he doing? I see he is crossing his arms, but what's it all about?

Calib: He's doing it this way.

B: Ah ha. Why is he doing that?

C: I don't know.

B: You don't know. Okay.

There was a break in the dialogue as Calib continued to play with the puppets. Then I asked:

B: And he just twisted around?

C: Yes.

Moreover, despite the theory, which held out the promise that my questioning would be internalized into his storytelling, there were no discernable improvements in Calib's storytelling. If anything, his telling became less verbal and more action-oriented.

One day in May Calib came forward to tell his story. It was a hot day and the children, not yet acclimated to the summer-like weather, were restless. Calib quickly began to lose his audience as he used fewer and fewer words, simply acting out actions with puppets. Impatient with the continuing lack of narrative progress, I prodded Calib to tell his story with words (as opposed to just puppet movements). He responded with very short explanations of the action, and then continued in the non-verbal mode. Eventually, some of the children joined in the calls for more words. Calib, pierced by his peers' heckling, became very upset. He left the storyteller chair in tears, and ran off to a far corner of the room. I immediately went over to comfort him, and offered him the opportunity to tell another story the next day in hopes of repairing the damage. Calib accepted the offer, and for the remainder of the program I treaded lightly on his storytelling.

The tale of Calib and the storytelling program is a complex one. It involves not only my efforts to help Calib tell better stories, but how these efforts played out in a larger classroom context. My attempts at narrative instruction might have gone smoother without the overlay of group management concerns, but that is the reality of the classroom. In

retrospect, I feel oddly fortunate that forces converged to cause Calib to cry that day in May. His tears alerted me that I was pushing too far in "scaffolding" his storytelling. I wonder how often I miss subtler signals.

I know how Calib felt that day in May from reflecting on my own learning. My most exciting experiences were the times when I was directing my own learning, pursuing my own thinking with the support and encouragement of an expert. My most trying times were when my learning was, in the parlance of the sociocultural perspective, the most heavily scaffolded. During such experiences I may have learned a lot of information, but negative feelings toward the experience tempered any benefits from the knowledge I gained.

True to these experiences, I have adopted as my credo of education Eleanor Duckworth's (1990) view that **the essence of pedagogy is to give learners the occasion to have their wonderful ideas and to let them feel good about themselves for having them**. In helping children have wonderful ideas about storytelling, it should be clear that issues of where the ideas emerge from, and who is controlling the telling of the story are of tremendous importance. In teaching, there are times for a "do nothing move": times to be patient, to wait, to let the child be in control.

I began this essay by calling storytime my classroom's most important preschool experience. I must qualify this statement, adding the caveat that storytime must add positively to children's sense of themselves as learners. Because of this, there are clearly limits to how much teachers should teach about storytelling.

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Teaching, Theory, and Teachers' Theory About Storytelling

One of my favorite moments in the cinema takes place in the seventies disaster classic Airport. In the film, George Kennedy plays Joe Patroni, a silver-haired, cigar-smoking aviation mechanic employed at the fictional Lincoln International Airport. Because of his renowned expertise, Patroni is given the urgent task of clearing a runway so a disabled airliner, piloted by Dean Martin, can land safely in the midst of a raging blizzard. In my favorite scene, Kennedy is in the cockpit of a Boeing 707 which is stuck in the snow, blocking the runway. His young sidekick gasps in disbelief as Kennedy tries to maneuver the stranded plane through a snow bank. As the engines roar and the plane shakes, Kennedy skillfully guides the plane safely off the landing strip. The stunned sidekick exclaims, "The instruction book said that was impossible." Kennedy calmly responds, "that's the nice thing about the 707, it can do everything but read".

I recount the scene because for me it captures some important truths about the relationship between teaching, theory, and what I call teachers' theory. Kennedy's character is the quintessential seasoned practitioner. Sure, he's read the instruction books (the theory), and probably has learned something from them too. But what he does, and why he does it so well, is based on his own experiences in the field (his teachers' theory).

In early education we have our own "instruction books". In years past they were the writings of Piaget and his adherents. More recently, these have been replaced by works of Vygotsky and his followers. But like the Boeing 707, four year-olds cannot read. And like Kennedy's character, master teachers operate according to their own teachers' theory which is

based far more on experience than the writings of educational theorists.

This article is an attempt to articulate some of the teachers' theory I have developed regarding helping children tell better stories. This has not been an easy task as I have found that teachers' theory is hard to confine to the written page. Part of my difficulty stems from the fact that teaching is so situationally bound; so much of what we do as teachers is dependent on individual children and circumstances, making broad prescriptions about teaching practice seem inappropriate. Difficulty also stems from the fact that my teachers' theory is constantly evolving as I try new ideas and test out old methods with new groups of children.

Despite these reservations, I believe the teachers' theory provided above can be useful. Since completing my dissertation, I have continued teaching young children. Though I have changed my storytelling program to meet the needs of my new charges, I have found that the four principles layed out in this article have guided much of what I have done. In that they have been of use to me, I hope they are helpful to other teachers who are working on the vital task of helping children become better storytellers.

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